A PANEL DISCUSSES COMMISSIONING

Report of Panel Discussion at the Biennial Meeting
of the
National Jewish Music Council
November 4, 1959

NATIONAL JEWISH MUSIC COUNCIL
Sponsored by
NATIONAL JEWISH WELFARE BOARD
145 East 32nd Street
New York 16, N. Y.

A PANEL DISCUSSES COMMISSIONING

Report of Panel Discussion at Biennial Meeting
of the

National Jewish Music Council
November 4, 1959

Panelists

Chairman: Julius Schatz

Mrs. Ben Zion Bokser
Cantor Charles Davidson
Abe Ellstein
Siegfried Landau
Rabbi Avraham Soltes
Bernard Weisberg

Includes Excerpt from Talk by Dr. Joachim Prinz

NATIONAL JEWISH MUSIC COUNCIL
Sponsored by the
NATIONAL JEWISH WELFARE BOARD
145 East 32nd Street
New York 16, N. Y.

October, 1960

A PANEL DISCUSSES COMMISSIONING

INTRODUCTION

This is a report of the Panel Discussion on Commissioning which took place at the Biennial Meeting of the National Jewish Music Council, November 4, 1959. It has been published at the request of many who were present at that meeting and felt that a record of the structure and content of the Panel Discussion would be useful to program chairmen.

The Discussion reflects a searching attitude toward questions related to commissioning an original Jewish musical work. It is being made available with the hope that it will suggest program devices that can be adapted by local groups to stimulate further discussion and direct participation through commissioning. Using local musicians and community leaders to express their own points of view on the problems and methods raised, similar programs can be developed for meetings and radio broadcasts and TV telecasts.

A PANEL DISCUSSES COMMISSIONING is the newest addition to the library of materials prepared to aid groups in understanding some of the purposes and methods of commissioning Jewish music. The previous two are: *COMMISSION A JEWISH MUSICAL WORK,* which is a handbook of procedures; and *PROGRESS REPORT ON COMMISSIONING,* which includes addresses of commissioning groups from whom scores may be obtained for review and performance. These three booklets are being made available free of charge from the office of the National Jewish Music Council in recognition of the importance of the theme of the 1961 Jewish Music Festival:

FOSTER JEWISH MUSICAL CREATIVITY

BY

PERFORMING A COMMISSIONED WORK and COMMISSIONING NEW MUSIC

Leah M. Jaffa
Executive Secretary

EXCERPT FROM

THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE APPROACH TO JEWISH SURVIVAL

Talk by Dr. Joachim Prinz
Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the National Jewish Music Council
November 4, 1959

Creativity is a human process that cannot be organized. But this does not mean that the creative artist must be permitted to starve. Neither must he be denied an honored place on the Jewish Community, regardless of whether or not he himself participates in organized Jewish life.

It is a parochial point of view -- in fact utter irresponsible nonsense -- to believe that a creative artist must live in solitude, in the creative solitude of his attic, while at work, and that because he is not organized with us he cannot be considered one of us.

It is the responsibility of organized Jewry in all its forms to stimulate the artist, to commission his work and above all to grant him creative freedom. We must respect the fact that he alone is the judge of what forms his dreams take. His artistic concepts are singularly and solely his own possession.

In the quiet struggle between nostalgia for the simple and moving art of yesterday and the drive of the new generation for artistic expression in twentieth century Jewish life through literature, painting, architecture and music, the creative artist can, and I hope will, play a decisive role.

His part is as great as that of the interpreter of Jewish law and customs. It is as significant as the role of the educator and the rabbi. Indeed, in the realm of creativity, the Jewish artist in our day has the unique opportunity of becoming a new Jewish priesthood in contemporary American Jewish life.

A PANEL DISCUSSES COMMISSIONING

Report of Panel Discussion on Commissioning

at the

Annual Meeting of the National Jewish Music Council
November 4, 1959

Julius Schatz, Chairman of Panel: Our panelists tonight include representatives of two creative groups. The first group is composed of musicians, composers and conductors. The second includes creators on another level, organization leaders who provide opportunities for artists to create, and give new works a chance to be played, sung and heard.

Our panelists are: Charles Davidson, composer and Cantor of the Wantagh Jewish Center, N.Y.; Abe Ellstein, composer and conductor; Siegfried Landau, composer and conductor; Mrs. Ben Zion Bokser, an active leader of the National Women's League of the United Synagogue of America; author and composer Rabbi Avraham Soltes of Sharey Tefilo Congregation, East Orange, N.J.; and Bernard Weisberg, Director of the American Zionist Youth Commission.

Now we are going to work on the questions that face us. Siegfried Landau, what does commissioning mean? What is a commission?

Siegfried Landau: In his talk, earlier this evening, Rabbi Joachim Prinz referred to the fact that many have the mistaken notion that the creative artist must work in an attic. History reveals just how erroneous this position is. For centuries the creative artist was an organic part of society. He served either the church or the court. One of the sicknesses of our society today is the fact that the creative artist is forced into the attic. I would like to point out that a solid 75% of our musical repertory would not be in existence if not for commissioning. Works like the Brandenburg concerti and other music by Bach, Mozart, and Verdi were written in periods when the creative musician-composer was an organic part of society. These were all commissioned works. Some of the greatest scores have been created because of direct commission for writing within a specific time limit. Commissioning is the approaching of a composer by an organization to give him a definite assignment, with a time limit and a definite payment. The composer is thus given an important function in society.

Julius Schatz: Cantor Davidson, when we talk about commissioning, we mean commissioning for what? -- for what purpose?

Charles Davidson: All of us belong to organizations, Congregations, Sisterhoods, Men's Clubs, Brotherhoods, B'nai B'rith, or Hadassah. These organizations do or can sponsor choral or orchestral groups within the community or on a national basis. These groups need new Jewish music, music which is graded to their particular amateur skills. We live in

communities where professional musicians live and teach. They also need new Jewish music. We have entree to our neighbors who are teachers of creative dance and of ballet. They are always interested in performing with new music. What a marvelous opportunity for composers and for Jewish organizations to commission new Jewish works!

My own experience as a composer who was approached by a national organization wishing to commission music on a holiday theme for their local chapters was both gratifying and memorable.

During Jewish Music Festival, and throughout the year, many of us associated with Synagogue life approach Jewish musical creativity in terms of the Synagogue Service. However, it has been my feeling that there is also a need for music which can combine the Jewish Music of the Synagogue with contemporary American life.

Consequently, when the National Women's League of the United Synagogue asked me to write a Purim musical for use by their Sisterhoods and other amateur groups, I considered this a creative challenge "just up my alley". I know that Mrs. Bokser, who is one of our panelists tonight, will wish later in the discussion, to tell you more about this particular commissioning project.

Mr. Schatz: Mr. Ellstein, will you tell us about other special occasions or areas which can serve as subjects for commissioning Jewish music?

Abe Ellstein: I would like to stress the importance to the composer of the encouragement which commissioning provides. The composer needs this encouragement. And no serious composer, will ever say, "I have been commissioned to write a hundred dollars worth, or two hundred dollars worth of music". The exact sum of money involved isn't as significant as is the fact that by commissioning you are opening a road to the composer. You are showing him that he is wanted, that he is necessary to the community.

One of the lonliest arts in the world is composing. You sit alone in the room with a white sheet of paper before you. You sit and look at the paper so long that finally the piece of music paper says, "Nu? Put something down already."

Local composers, perhaps as yet unknown, should be commissioned. Commissioning a well-known, successful composer doesn't do much for <u>him</u>, doesn't do anything for <u>you</u>, because you have not discovered a new talent that is waiting to be discovered by you and your community.

Now, you ask, what themes can we use? The greatest theme of all is that of the Bible, about which you can write and write and never be finished. You can also turn to Israel for subject matter; Israel, its struggle, its liberation, Independence Day, and the building of a new country. What can be more organic or more dramatic than what has happened in Israel in the last ten years?

If, for inspiration, you want to go back to a world that does not exist anymore, you can go back to the Shtetl, to the wedding, to the Badchen, to

the life of our grandfathers and grandmothers. As modern composers we must find a way to bring this period to life, so that future generations will know of this heritage.

Julius Schatz: I would like now to turn to Rabbi Avraham Soltes, who has had a special kind of experience in developing creativity that differs from that of commissioning. I refer to the conduct of a contest by his Synagogue.

Rabbi Avraham Soltes: When we became interested in undertaking a creative project, we felt that we faced a very delicate problem. Having many composers among my friends, how would I decide which to commission without offending all the others? If we were to conduct a contest, instead of granting a commission, we would eliminate this problem and we would, at the same time, be encouraging composers of whose existence we might not be aware. Mr. Ellstein has referred to the importance of discovering new composers not yet well-established. In every community there are composers writing material that may not be known to the world. Some of the great works that are part of our classic musical tradition were written quietly, by men perhaps unknown at the time of writing -- many were commissioned, as Mr. Landau has suggested, but many others were not commissioned.

We felt, too, that by conducting a contest for works on certain ideas, on themes that we'd like to see set to music, we'd have not only one man's expression, but many. (Even the greatest composers, including Beethoven, when commissioned on certain occasions, did not produce their best music.)

By conducting the time-honored contest, in which themes were suggested, and by opening it to all composers who wished to enter, we felt that we achieved several significant purposes simultaneously:

Firstly, by setting forth not one but many themes we wanted to see set to music, the multifarious needs of our community could be met. We hoped to interest many composers, each selecting one theme of his choice. Many compositions were written on the basis of a half a dozen different texts that were suggested.

Secondly, a large number of community leaders became involved in planning and implementing the contest. When you grant a commission to one particular composer, the selection of theme, medium, style and form is largely in his hands. In the case of a contest, the entire community is continuously interested. Committees work hard to implement many aspects of the project.

There must be a determination of what kind of works are most needed. Rules have to be determined around questions such as: how long should the compositions be, when do we want them in, how shall we go about conducting other aspects of the contest?

The panel of judges has to be determined. Many composers are interested in having their work seen and heard by important people. What better way than by submitting a work to a panel of judges among whose number sit those whose opinions are highly valued? The distinguished panel, which we were priveleged to set up, attracted many composers.

The prizes have to be set forth, including a promise of performance. It is important that there be assurance that once the works are composed, they will not simply remain on paper, but will be performed. Music is designed to be heard.

Publicity has to be given to all these elements. It will stimulate the interest of the community, stimulate many composers to be attracted to what we're doing and encourage unknown aspirants to submit their work.

Thus, when we conducted our contest for new music, many members of the community were involved, devoting their attention to the creation of new works and thus to the furtherance of Jewish music.

Julius Schatz: Now comes the final question which I want to address to two panelists, both of whom work with Jewish organizations on a national level: How can national organizations and their local groups go about the practice of commissioning new works? First we will hear from Mrs. Ben Zion Bokser, who represents the National Women's League of the United Synagogue of America.

Mrs. Ben Zion Bokser: I will report my own experience with commissioning. It began at a National Jewish Music Council meeting like this. At that time, I was the program chairman of the National Women's League of the United Synagogue. On the afternoon to which I refer, I was very much interested to hear about commissioning new music. I found the idea stimulating. Then I went back to the office of the National Women's League and found, in the mail, another of the daily-received batches of scripts sent in by local groups to be read by our jury (in the hope of finding some that can be sent out to our seven hundred local Sisterhoods). The scripts were all written around parodies of "My Fair Lady", "Davey Crockett", and song hits on Broadway. The music in each case was fine music, written for the Broadway stage, but was not related to the American Jewish scene. Some of the lyrics were good, but some were far from filling the needs for a Jewish program.

Commissioning Jewish works seemed like a good idea. But I was a little scared. The next day, I called Leah Jaffa, the Music Council's Executive Secretary and said to her, "Does this mean we can commission a work for just plain women -- just every-day women to get up and sing at Hadassah or B'nai B'rith or Sisterhood meetings?" She said, "Certainly you can. First try to sell the idea to your board. If you're successful, we'll help you by discussing next steps."

Well, I went to the board. Our board members go out to visit local groups; they had also heard Sisterhood programs like "Red Gatkes" and "Blue Shoes" - the kind of thing that they were very sorry to see introduced. They all felt, with me, that commissioning was a challenge and that we should give it a try.

The next question was, "Whom shall we commission?" Again I called Leah, and she said "The National Women's League is directly related, is it not, to the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary? Why not call the Dean of that School for advice?"

I did and he advised me that one of the alumni of the Cantors Institute, Charles Davidson, was a composer who, because he was a Music Director as well as a Cantor, understood Sisterhood audiences very well. We contacted Cantor Davidson who, together with Ray Smolover, wrote a Purim Operetta for us, produced later at the convention of the National Women's League, for the delegates of the 700 local groups. The women found it light, attractive, and gay. It reflected the indigenous American Jewish scene.

Julius Schatz: Last, I'll ask Bernard Weisberg, who works with teenagers and young adults to talk about the importance of the local group in commissioning.

Bernard Weisberg: In the few minutes at my disposal, I would like to emphasize the importance of using the local composer's services for commissioning new works.

Often, when we talk about commissioning, we tend to magnify the job out of proportion. We think in terms of some great opera, symphony, or choral work, which has to be written by an outstanding and well-known composer. We tend to ignore the fact that the local group can sponsor the composition of a modest work (like a song) by a local composer and thus contribute to the cultural revival that Dr. Prinz spoke about earlier.

It has been my experience that this accomplishes two important ends. Not only can it help the composer on a local level to have the audience which is so necessary for the creative act and without which the work in itself has no meaning, but it has a great value in stimulating the local performing Jew to a greater effort and to more activity within the organization which sponsors his particular group.

And I think that we can't ignore the importance of pride in the project. If a local group undertakes to sponsor or commission a work, the pride that it receives in this work it is going to perform and in the performance itself very often will be a motivating factor for increased activity.

I would ask all the people here who represent national organizations not only to think in terms of national commissions of musical works but to see to it that the concept, the idea, filters down to the local grass-roots level where it can help to create the great audience that Jewish composers need in this country.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Julius Schatz: You have heard answers to what we consider to be the most crucial questions in the area of commissioning. The floor is now open for questions from all of you. You may direct them to any member of the panel. Please bear in mind that the purpose is to channel thinking into action that will lead to the practical fulfillment of the commissioning and creating of more Jewish musical works.

Questioner No. 1: Is there a variance among the members of the panel as to the direction the commission grant should take? It seems to me that it is a mistake to offer a commission, the precious money that an artist needs so much, for a popular work to be performed by a women's chorus, the artistic result of which might not be as satisfactory as a major work.

Siegfried Landau: The stigma on the word "popular" represents a misconception. It is true that many composers who are not popular do a lot to increase the faith in that dogma. It is a dogma. It should be replaced by some straight thinking. It is not popularity by itself that is the test of quality. There are many simple signs -- by Brahms, like his lullaby, for example -- that can be sung by an amateur. These songs are works of art. I can name you innumerable symphonies that are very good, but the symphonic form does not assure their artistic quality. The fact that you write for a popular medium does not automatically make it less good.

For commissioning, the organizational group needs a composer and a ready medium for performance. If the ready medium is an amateur chorus, the capabilities of the members must be taken into consideration.

Questioner No. 2: Can you create creativity, is it something you can legislate. Can you buy it?

Rabbi Avraham Soltes: Can creativity be created? I think that a moment ago Siegfried Landau indicated the answer to this particular question. Creativity by its very nature cannot be organized. You can't say exactly how it's done. This is one of the great mysteries and miracles of the universe: Who knows how creation is carried out? - Whence to the singer comes the song? We don't know. We do know, however, that most human beings are affected by the attitudes of other human beings. They are stimulated, positively or negatively. As far as creativity is concerned it doesn't always matter whether the stimulation is positive or negative. Both can in turn produce results.

There have been writers who have been irritated by fate. They write a letter, a column, an article, or a poem which remains immortal thereafter in answer to something that irritated them, like the pearl that the oyster produces as a result of a slight irritation. There are people who are stimulated to creativity through the adulation, admiration and praise of those they respect. Men have composed to honor special occasions, have composed for love.

Most people find that a particular purpose or objective is helpful and stimulating. How many creative artists start something and don't finish it because there's a lack of motivation. Because Bach had to provide music for his choir week after week, we are the heirs to a heritage of cantatas.

We can't create creativity, but we can stimulate it, and this is what We're trying to do.

Questioner No. 3: I'd like to direct my question to Mr. Landau.

Dr. Prinz got across to us the idea of the responsibility of our society for supporting our creative artist. But can the creative artist do his best production under the pressures of meeting a time limitation, a dollar limitation, or can he do it best where creativity grows as the composer feels it and is ultimately rewarded by acceptance and recognition.

Siegfried Landau: I'm very glad that you asked that question because we often read arguments to the effect that composers might not do their best under time pressure. Rabbi Soltes did mention some poor Beethoven scores written on commission -- but there are also some poor Beethoven without commission. Just as there is some very good Beethoven with or without commission. The methods of working of composers differ with their personalities. There are people who work better with a time limit. I know composers -- and history has proved that there are a number of composers -- who simply would not produce well without a time limit. For instance, a man like Mozart preferred time limits. There are people who work badly with a time limit. This point is not relevant to the question of "yes" commissioning, or "no" commissioning.

What we should stress with commissions, and what I try to stress, is that the composer does not need the solitude of the attic. The fact is that while organized society cannot assure the survival of creativity, organized society must definitely understand its responsibility toward it. Without that responsibility there will be no survival. I do not agree with Mr. Ellstein's point that the famous composer does not need a commission. I've never known a composer who rejected a commission. They all need commissions. The Jewish Music Council and the affiliated organizations cannot assure great Jewish music of value but it will definitely help it by commissioning.

* * * * *

Julius Schatz: The numerous unanswered queries for which there is no discussion time tonight testifies to the real interest in this important and continuing concept of commissioning.

An Advisory Committee of eminent musicians has been set up for consultation in connection with the problems of commissioning. The members already appointed to this Advisory Committee are:

Dr. A.W. Binder, Dr. Isadore Freed, Rabbi Ario S. Hyams, Mrs. Ben Zion Bokser, Siegfried Landau and Rabbi Avraham Soltes. Others will be added to this Committee as the needs arise.

Requests for consultation are to be addressed to the office of the National Jewish Music Council.

NATIONAL JEWISH MUSIC COUNCIL

Rabbi Emanuel Green
Chairman

Leah M. Jaffa
Executive Secretary

Dr. A. W. Binder
Vice-Chairman

Rabbi Ario S. Hyams, *Editor*
Jewish Music Notes

Sponsored by the

NATIONAL JEWISH WELFARE BOARD

Solomon Litt, *President*

Alan J. Altheimer, *Chairman*
Jewish Community Center Division

Sanford Solender, *Director*
Jewish Community Center Division

Mrs. Maurice Kurn, *Chairman*
Program Section

Miriam R. Ephraim, *Director,*
Program Section